DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 446 839 PS 028 960

TITLE	Parent Involvement in Decision-Making.
INSTITUTION	National Center for Early Development & Learning, Chapel Hill, NC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2000-06-00
NOTE	3p.; Based on a paper presented at the Head Start National Research Conference (5th, Washington, DC, June 2000).
CONTRACT	R307A60004
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	NCEDL Spotlights; n23 Jun 2000
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Budgeting; *Decision Making; Early Childhood Education; Early Intervention; *Parent Participation; *Parents; *Program Administration
IDENTIFIERS	*Smart Start NC

ABSTRACT

A study examined parent involvement in decision making in the Smart Start early childhood programs in North Carolina. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and surveys. Findings indicated that both the interested public and the Smart Start board members agreed that having parents involved in decisions about how Smart Start money was to be spent was important, but was not always easy to implement. Three equally important factors were found to affect the level and quality of meaningful parent involvement in board activities and decision making: (1) logistics, including arranging child care and transportation; (2) structure, including group size, lack of orientation prior to meetings, number of parents, and the decision-making process used; and (3) climate, including feeling intimidated, not knowing others, not feeling useful, and the vocabulary used. Citizens thought that parents were qualified to be included in the decision-making process for how to allocate money in the early childhood program budget, but did not believe that parents currently have much influence. Local board members agreed that parent involvement is important, but pointed out that recruiting and retaining parents to regularly attend board meetings was difficult because of the many barriers to participation and because of difficulty in defining the parents' role. Three partnerships identified by executive directors as successfully involving parents in boards provided information on how to involve parents more effectively. (KB)

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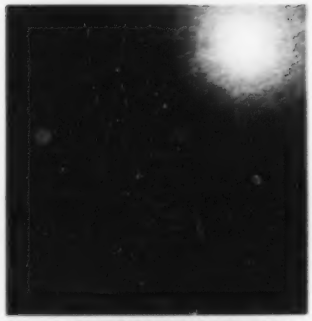

No. 23 June 2000

Parent Involvement in Decision-Making

This Spotlight is based on a presentation by Pam Winton, Michelle Barrick & Kate Thegen at Head Start's Fifth National Research Conference in Washington, DC, in June 2000.

Parental input in budget decisions valued but difficult

IN A STUDY OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT in the Smart Start early childhood initiative of North Carolina, researchers studied how parents are currently involved in making decisions. Through a multi-method approach including observations, interviews and surveys, researchers found that both the interested public and the Smart Start board members agreed that having parents involved in the decisions about how Smart Start money is spent was important, however it is not always easy to implement.

Smart Start is a public-private initiative in which local partnerships of parents, educators, child care providers, nonprofits, churches and business people decide how to improve (or provide, in some cases) local child care, health care, and family services to children under the age of six.

Major Findings from Study

Three major factors affect the extent to which parents are meaningfully involved in board activities and decision-making: logistics, structure and climate. In terms of climate a prominent theme was that parents on the boards feel intimidated.

Obstacles perceived by parents to meaningful board involvement

Logistical	Structural	Climate
■ Time of meeting	■ Group size	■ Intimidation
■ Arranging for child care	■ Lack of orientation prior to meetings	■ Not knowing others
■ Transportation	■ Number of parents	■ Volcabulary used
■ Reimbursement for expenses	■ Decision-making process	■ Not feeling useful

Boards are actively addressing some of these factors; however, factors such as climate are not defined in the same way by everyone. The above factors (logistics, structure and climate) were more likely to be described as impediments rather than supports, which validates the fact that parent involvement on boards is a major challenge.

Researcher Pam Winton said, "Most people think that addressing the logistical barriers will solve the problem, but our research indicates that the factors involving the structure and climate of board meetings are equally influential on the level and quality of their involvement."

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Citizens surveyed think that parents are qualified to be included in the decision-making process for how to allocate the money in their early childhood initiative program's budget, and that they have important ideas to contribute. However, they do not think they currently have much influence.

Local board members interviewed agree that parent involvement is important, but they point out that recruiting and retaining parents to regularly attend board meetings can be problematical because of the many barriers to participation. They also indicate that once a parent joins their local board it can be difficult to define the parent's role.

Summary

Parent involvement in Smart Start board decision-making is considered valuable, however for the most part, parents are not playing a meaningful decision-making role. This research suggests parent involvement has been a challenge for local partnership that won't be solved easily or through superficial approaches.

What can be learned from 'promising practice sites'

Three "promising practice" sites (partnerships seen by other executive directors as successfully involving parents on boards) were identified and the following was learned from these sites:

- These partnerships offer supports to parents (within the categories of logistics and structure) in 80% of available opportunities to do so, compared with sites that provide the same supports in 24% of available opportunities to do so.
- These partnerships are sensitive to power and equity issues and embed such considerations in all board activities.
- Board decisions are generally made via a consensus decision-making process versus a more formal and structured process such as *Robert's Rules of Order*.
- These partnership also acknowledge that meaningfully involving parents on boards is a continual struggle.

If you want to know more...

Cornish, M.M., & Noblitt, G. (1997). *Bringing the community into the process: Issues and promising practices for involving parents & business in local Smart Start Partnerships.* UNC Smart Start Evaluation Report. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Center.

Jeppson, E. S., & Thomas, J. (1995). *Essential allies: Families as advisors.* Bethesda, MD: Institute for Family-Centered Care.

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NC Smart Start home page: **www.smartstart-nc.org**

NCEDL is administratively housed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to UNC-CH, partners in NCEDL are the University of Virginia, the University of California at Los Angeles, and the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. This project is supported under the Education Research and Development Centers Program, PR/award number R307A60004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Opinions do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education **www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECI/**, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the U.S. Department of Education, or any other sponsoring organization. Permission is granted to reprint this *Spotlight*; we ask that you acknowledge NCEDL and the authors of the presentation on which this Spotlight is based.

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